

Good morning, my name is Sarah Launderville and I'm the executive director of the Vermont Center for Independent Living and I'm also the President of the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights.

VCDR is made up of organizations who support or advocate on disability issues in Vermont. We appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and encourage the committee to seek testimony from individuals directly about their experiences too.

Some of our members organizations received funding to support people with disabilities but most did not. I'll speak to the work that has been done using some of that financial support and where members have identified holes. We've heard from the majority of members that challenges that existed pre-COVID have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The VT Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired received \$100,000 to provide training on various devices such as iPhones, iPads to people with visual disabilities to help them connect better with family, friends and doctors. This was to help decrease their sense of social isolation, which has always been an issue but was heightened when the pandemic hit. The funding for this expired in December. As of January 1, 2021 they are still actively serving 78 people in the program.

Attached to this testimony is a report that highlights the outcomes of the program, and we are hoping that this program can continue moving forward. See: "SMART Training Q2 State Report"

The Vermont Family Network received a PPP loan, but no other funding. They've helped with some PPE distribution to families of children with disabilities in the Bhutanese-Nepali community, and have continued to support families through their Helpline, trainings and virtual programs in schools through Puppets in Education. There have been issues with culturally and

linguistically competent COVID-19 messaging, though that has gotten better over time.

VFN Helpline calls have been increasing in number, duration and complexity, especially with regard to special education concerns and complications with schools' adherence to Individualized Education Plan (IEPs) in remote/hybrid environment. They are connecting parents to other parents making peer connections with those who are having increased struggles with isolation, food insecurity, housing, employment, mental health issues and transportation.

We also know that very low- income people with disabilities, such as those on Reach-Up, have not received the same level of support that folks on the enhanced unemployment or others who got the stimulus checks, though there has been some help through 3 Squares and a direct make-up payment to folks on Reach-Up. Reach-Up families with an adult on SSI are still having a percentage of that count against their benefit, so any extra costs from COVID weigh heavy on those families.

VCIL received over \$900,000 as part of the federal CARES Relief bill. We have until the end of September of this year to spend that money. We have been using the funds in the following ways:

- Food Access: VCIL runs a Meals on Wheels program for people with disabilities under the age of sixty. We do this in partnership with the Senior Meal sites. Before COVID you could be eligible for the program if you are a person with a disability, under the age of sixty and who can't prepare a food because of disability. With the COVID funds we expanded this to include people who also couldn't be in public because of their heightened risks surrounding COVID.
- Under the CARES funding 89 additional people are receiving this support. These are people under the age of sixty who have a disability. In addition to that, we know that meal sites served extra meals during April and May to make sure that folks had back up meals in their homes in case drivers got sick or meal sites had to shut down. A few sites continue

to deliver weekend meals as long as the Stay at Home order is in effect. So far, we have accounted for 8,853 meals totaling \$57,545. This number will grow as we will continue this expansion until September 2021. The need for COVID related meals has slowed down some since last summer, and hasn't picked up in the way we were expecting with a second wave.

At VCIL we wanted to create a way for people with disabilities to access funding to help pay for unique circumstances in light of the pandemic. We created the RISE Program which allows for people with disabilities to access up to \$2,500 in funding. To date we've spent \$25,783. Requests range from increased PPE that peers were not able to access themselves, laptops, tablets and accessories for individuals to be more connected helping with the issue of social isolation and/or connecting to doctor appointments, including mental health counseling. We've also assisted property taxes and a musical instrument.

Applications are still coming in.

I've included a testimonial from a peer who received Oxygen from the RISE Fund. I'm hoping you'll take a look at the complications people have and how the flexibility of the fund was able to help pay for something that their insurance company wouldn't. It's especially telling how bureaucratic systems are not adapting to the pandemic and needs of people with disabilities. The document is titled "Oxygen".

In addition, we sent Care packages to individuals with disabilities and plan another one.

We've conducted a couple of surveys. One specifically on access to groceries. I've included a report with my testimony "*Survey Results- Grocery and Food Access*" that I encourage you to read. It highlights experiences of folks with disabilities, the types of foods they are accessing and issues they've personally

experienced. It also highlights the ongoing issue that if you need grocery delivery, you can't use your EBT benefit online from most stores and companies like Instacart.

We were also able to send care packages and purchase an additional \$8,000 worth of hand sanitizer for the VT Developmental Disabilities Council to include in care packages to individuals they work with.

I've included in my written testimony some responses from people after receiving the care package. The pandemic has been especially hard for some and knowing a connection can be made has helped with the social isolation people are experiencing.

In July VCIL sent out over 400 care packages to our active peers. The boxes contained hand sanitizer, 2 masks, note cards and stamps, a pocket garden, Covid-19 resource information and of course some delicious chocolate. The response we received (often on the notecards we sent out) were heartwarming and we are planning on sending another care package in the near future.

*Solitary life, chronic pain, and immobility, can create a bleak, disheartening existence. Makes you wonder why God even keeps you alive. VCIL's simple gifts let me know there are people out there who care that I still exist. I know, I am not the only disabled person living with such issues and VCIL is a blessing to us all. Thank you again. You lifted my spirits very much. BTW, that was AWESOME chocolate!!!*

*Imagine! Thank you for such a delightful and perfect surprise. Just what I have been thinking about – parsley, basil chives. Yes! Cooking for one makes me no longer buy bunches from coop or farmers as they mostly turn to rot in my fridge. A few pots, even in winter, will get the light & yield delight. So thoughtful of you.*

Another area we are concerned about is healthcare and long-term care. A lot of people have had less in-person case-management and therapies. Some people are holding off on in-person physical therapy, elective surgeries and there will be a longer-term impact because of that.

The cost of isolation is taxing people's mental and physical health. Some are receiving relief through technology, but there are many who are not able to use or access technology. We need to be ready to address that increased need as well.

I'm happy to answer questions as they arise at 802-249-4939 or [slaunderville@vcil.org](mailto:slaunderville@vcil.org).

Thank you.